

Government provides free COVID-19 nucleic acid testing service for the elderly and targeted groups

The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) announced today (April 2) that the free COVID-19 nucleic acid testing service is being provided for eligible persons of high-risk/high-exposure targeted groups and all elderly people aged 70 or above at community testing centres (CTCs) and mobile specimen collection stations so as to achieve the goal of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment" and enable more vulnerable infected elderly to seek timely medical attention and be prescribed with treatment drugs.

In view that the fifth wave of the epidemic has remained dire in recent days, the overall transmission risk is still high with a large number of transmission chains remaining in the community. Several thousands of newly infected cases continue to be reported each day, and infected cases were recorded in all districts in Hong Kong and almost all buildings in the past seven days. The risk of serious illness and death upon contraction of COVID-19 is very high for the elderly, in particular those aged 70 or above and not yet vaccinated. Among the death cases recorded during the fifth wave of the epidemic, almost 90 per cent are elderly people aged 70 or above, with around 70 per cent of whom having yet to be vaccinated. Specifically, there have been one death case out of about six infected elderly aged 80 or above and not yet vaccinated, and one death case out of every 18 infected elderly aged 70 to 79 and not yet vaccinated. At the same time, a reduction in fatality rate of infected elderly who have taken three doses of vaccine by at least 10 times has been observed. Moreover, the capacity for the healthcare system to provide medical support and treatment for the elderly has been substantially enhanced, and the Government has also procured sufficient doses of COVID-19 oral drugs which can considerably reduce the risk of serious illness or death when taken during the early stages of onset of illness.

The Government strongly appeals to the elderly, especially those aged 70 or above and not yet vaccinated, to receive early vaccination for protecting themselves and to undergo testing for effective and early identification of infection, so that they can seek timely medical attention and receive suitable diagnosis and treatment. The elderly are encouraged to make use of the rapid antigen test (RAT) kits in the anti-epidemic service bags distributed from today onwards by the Government to conduct testing on their own. They should also put on the KN95 masks provided in the service bags when they go out or receive visitors at home. Taking into account the need of the elderly, the Government will provide free COVID-19 nucleic acid test with swab samples collected by professionals at around 100 CTCs and mobile specimen collection stations in various districts of Hong Kong for all elderly aged 70 or above without the need for booking in advance. Elderly people tested negative (whether by RAT or nucleic acid test) should seize the time and visit any nearby community vaccination centres to get vaccinated

immediately under the "same-day tickets" arrangement, via private doctors and clinics offering vaccination service or at mobile vaccination stations. Details on vaccination service can be found on the Government's thematic website for the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme (www.covidvaccine.gov.hk/en), or solicit assistance from family and friends, district organisations or elderly service institutions to make enquiry and arrangement.

Meanwhile, the Government will continue to conduct large-scale COVID-19 testing for staff of individual sectors under high-risk/high-exposure groups (targeted group persons) in order to cut off transmission chains as quickly as possible and allow normal operation of the relevant industries. The regular compulsory testing of all targeted group persons, whether they have completed a vaccination course or not, must be done by using combined nasal and throat swabs collected by professionals. The arrangement is applicable to all full-time and part-time staff of relevant industries. Given the higher infection risks of targeted group persons, only those who have tested positive in the past month (including positive cases tested either by nucleic acid tests recorded by the Department of Health (DH) or by RATs that have been self-declared to the DH) can be temporarily exempted from undergoing the above regular nucleic acid compulsory testing.

In general, only targeted group persons who are vaccinated or those who are unfit for vaccination because of health reasons are eligible for receiving free COVID-19 testing at CTCs. They must present valid medical certificates/vaccination records/documents of identity proof (see Notes) for receiving free tests. In other words, persons of targeted groups will need to pay \$240 for the regular testing service if they do not fall under the category of being unfit for vaccination because of health reasons. The specific requirements for eligible persons of various targeted groups (including testing frequency, specimen requirement, conditions for receiving free test) are set out in the Annex. In accordance with the revision of testing requirement by the Education Bureau for school staff who have not yet taken the first dose of vaccine, the frequency for eligible school staff to undergo free testing at CTCs is now changed to once every seven days.

Moreover, the CTCs also continue to provide free voluntary nucleic acid testing service for staff members of residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons with disabilities and nursing homes who are fully vaccinated (can receive a free nucleic acid test every seven days on a voluntary basis) and personnel working in markets and licensed hawkers (can receive a free nucleic acid test every 28 days on a voluntary basis).

The free testing arrangement will be available until the end of April. The Government regularly reviews the coverage and frequency of targeted group testing and if such testing should be publicly funded based on the latest epidemic risk assessment. A spokesman for the FHB said that the provision of free tests for targeted groups involves the use of public resources. Given that the Government must uphold the principle of effective use of resources, public money should only be used to subsidise individual eligible persons for taking nucleic acid tests in very exceptional situations.

The spokesman said, "The provision of free nucleic acid test for the elderly and targeted groups and the systematic promotion of RAT to all members of the public (including the appeal for all to conduct RATs every day from April 8 to April 10) can assist the Government in gauging the situation of local infection and providing appropriate isolation arrangement or treatment for the infected people to reduce the spread of the virus in the community or household."

Notes:

- (i) Persons who are unfit to receive COVID-19 vaccination because of health reasons are required to present a relevant medical certificate;
- (ii) persons who are vaccinated (i.e. have received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine, or received the second dose but have not yet passed 14 days, or completed a vaccination course of two doses) should present a relevant vaccination record (such as by downloading their electronic vaccination records or saving the printouts of their vaccination records to their mobile phones, or bringing along the printouts or copies of their vaccination records); and
- (iii) certain groups should also present card/letter/document proof issued by relevant organisations for verification of identity.